

The Rev. Kate Byrd
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Part of the Story

As many of you know I am the mother of fraternal twin boys Patrick and Thomas, as well as a fabulous little girl, Libbie, their older sister. And, I have to tell you that when I was pregnant with the boys (who are now three) I vividly remember recalling the story we heard this morning from Genesis, of Rebekah, and her own twin pregnancy with Esau and Jacob. Because as soon as I was able to feel my boys kicking around in my womb it never ceased to end (not even after they were born), and I began to worry like Rebekah “If it is to be this way, why [or at least how] do I live?” I mean my first pregnancy was not a piece of cake, but compared to the twins it was a 5 star all inclusive resort vacation. Even the sonogram technician, who I saw with great frequency as the pregnancy progressed, would remark how incredibly active the boys were. Whenever that technician waved her magical wand over my belly it looked like a WWE smackdown in there. Reminding me of our passage, as the Lord answers Rebekah’s pleas, with what I can only assume would be the least reassuring words of comfort to have ever been uttered. As God said to Rebekah, well my dear there are “Two nations...in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided.” I don’t know what you expected?

While you may know the number and birth order of my own children, you may or may not know that I am an only child. And, as an only child I have no real way of knowing what it is like to have siblings, to share a childhood, a life, a home, a parent with another person. Knowing that I could give my children this experience, though, I have desired nothing more than for them to have a loving, close, and enduring relationship with one another. But, passages and stories like we heard today terrify me because even I know that when it comes to siblings there is almost always some kind of rivalry. Because, as my Father always says, siblings can share the same parents, eat from the same cereal box, grow up under the same roof, and still be wildly different from one another.

As Rebekah’s twin boys arrive, we are told, “The first came out red, all his body like a hairy mantle; so they named him Esau. Afterward his brother came out, with his hand gripping Esau’s heel; so he was named Jacob.” As the boys grew Esau became “a skillful hunter, [and] a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, living in tents... Isaac loved Esau, because he was fond of game; [and] Rebekah loved Jacob,” because he was constantly by her side in the tents. Now, I am not going to pretend for one second to be an expert on parenting, but I can say that I do know that as parents we are not supposed to have favorites (or at least we’re not supposed to show it). Not to mention, everything can feel a little trickier with twins. For example, last year my mother gave our boys a set of plates as a gift, one got a tractor, and the other a dinosaur, and to this day we are still fighting over the stupid tractor plate! But even more, for Esau and Jacob, living in a hierarchical patriarchal society fraught with the necessities of security through things like birthright, they were pitted against each other from the very beginning. Because while they were twins, it was Esau who was technically the oldest and thus the inheritor of the birth right, while Jacob was technically the younger and thus under the rule and authority of his “older” brother.

Lucky for Jacob, as his name implies, he was a heel. Cunning, determined and willing to do whatever it took, even going over and against his twin brother to get what he wanted and felt he deserved. Unlucky for Esau, while he was strong and skilled as a hunter, he was a bit daft, lacking in intuition and most

certainly in foresight. Which is how Jacob, who spent his entire life learning the skills of managing a home and creating a meal was so easily able to win over his brother, who was starved from a long day's work hunting and tending the field. Winning that coveted birthright and the security of a double inheritance, all with a simple bowl of stew.

While this story troubles me, with its emphasis on the ins and outs of a patriarchal society, the dangers of unconscious parental biases or faux pas, and most especially the sheer damage that comes from sibling rivalries. At the same time it is fascinating to think that this sacred story is part and parcel of our Biblical narrative. Even more, of God's redemptive work in the world. Jacob, as the "younger" was certainly not born to receive the blessing of Isaac and inherit the birthright of Esau, but he did. Rebekah as the wife was not supposed to have any sway over the ins and outs of the family "politics", and yet she will (spoiler alerts). And, in the end (more spoiler alerts) the brothers, who by all rights should be enemies, end up sharing in an embrace and reconciliation, both going their own ways in peace and prosperity. So what does this tell us about God, about humanity, about ourselves, and our place in this great arc of redemption?

However flawed or broken we may feel, or seem, or even be, we can and do have a part to play in God's redemptive work in the world, because, we like Abraham the father of Israel, and more specifically of Isaac, like Rebekah his wife, like Jacob and Esau their twins, are God's chosen people then, now, and forever. Reminding us how God, like the sower in our parable from Matthew, is reckless in the ways God spreads around Divine favor, haphazardly throwing it wherever it will land, whether or not it will germinate, take root, or even have the ability to thrive and produce. Because that is how God is, using every little bit of creation as a part of the redemption narrative that we are all intimately tied up in and connected to.

I have to tell you, as parents, Drew and I often feel exhausted, sometimes even a bit worn down. And yet there is beauty and hope and love all around us even in the midst of sleepless nights, knockdown drag out tantrums, lego strewn living rooms, and potty training mishaps. I wonder sometimes if it is the same for God. Despite our propensity, like Jacob and Esau, to let jealousy and greed, physical desires and wants, or whatever drives us to act in ways (as Paul says in Romans) that are opposed to the Spirit, to get in our way of treating one another with dignity and respect, God still has faith in our ability as siblings in this one united human family to choose grace and love over and above hatred and destruction. Because, for as many rivalries as we have created and witnessed, as much destruction as we have caused and experienced, God knows, like every parent, and every person who has cared for another life, that we came from a space of pure grace and divine love. Which gives me more than hope, it gives me security of faith in our God as a joyful and loving creator and in us as children of that same Creator made to be a part of this blessed story of redemption.